

Remarks on Mr. Sadler's Paper in the January Number of the Monthly Notices. By C. G. Talmage, Esq.

The January (1879) Number of the *Monthly Notices* contains a paper with the title "Notes on the late Admiral Smyth's *Cycle of Celestial Objects*, volume the second, commonly known as the *Bedford Catalogue*."

It is to be remembered that the book commented on is by a past President and Medalist of the Royal Astronomical Society.

The writer of the article commences by saying that, "unless he is mistaken, the Presidential Address is couched in eminently cautious language as to the exactness of Admiral Smyth's work."

As a matter of fact, he *is* mistaken, for in fairness he should have given these words of the Astronomer Royal: "My confidence in the exactness of the observations is purely personal. Knowing the attention which has been given to the instrumental adjustments, the intentness of the observer upon his work, the nerve, which is made steady rather than disturbed by the anxiety to procure a good observation, and the general skill in the management of the instruments, I can truly say that, if an accurate observation were required, I should desire that it should be made by Captain Smyth. . . . And in presenting the medal, I beg leave to convey with it the expression that never was a medal more worthily earned."

There is not much ambiguity in language like that; and the Astronomer Royal, in a letter to me lately, again says: "I had great confidence in Captain Smyth's observations."

I have received from Professor C. P. Smyth a letter which he has requested me to read to the meeting. It is in part as follows:—

"I am too busy to be able to come to the meeting, and I should probably be esteemed, if present, an insufficiently disinterested speaker. But at this distance I trust I can look on calmly enough at the affair, and certainly should know some useful and necessary data towards understanding it.

"The case begins with the printing and publishing, by the Royal Astronomical Society, of a paper containing, at first sight, merely a list of errata in my late father's old and now long since out-of-print book, *A Cycle of Celestial Objects*.

"If such a list of errata were ably, thoroughly, carefully made, and deduced by its author from his own recent observations of the heavens, it would add much to the value of the book so corrected, would conduce to the progress of sidereal astronomy, and would prove the ability as well as the experience of the compiler also. Nor need there be any difficulty in accepting that, in such a work as the *Cycle*, new and original in its own day, unique in character and comprehensiveness still, and aiming at describing, sometimes with exactitude, sometimes in a brief cursory manner only, nearly half the heavens, there was an

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immense deal left to other men in subsequent ages, with more time at their disposal and larger telescopes, both to improve, perfect, and extend; while to have attempted merely to observe all the objects as fully as some of them were, during the comparatively short time the *Cycle* was in preparation, by one man in his private house, would have occupied centuries. And this necessary difference of degree of attention which my father had paid to the very different stellar objects all included together in the *Cycle*, was both abundantly explained by him and understood and appreciated by his contemporaries. So that some of them would take up the book to fish out therefrom a mere approximate note of some star-group to begin their own observations upon; while others would sit down either to study in it the long series of micrometer measures which he had made, year after year, on such an absorbing object as γ *Virginis* or to discuss his orbital representations of its movements both in the past and for the future.

"But in place of any such common-sense and simple-honesty style of criticising a special book as this, and which book no one, particularly observers, need attend to if they can get better information elsewhere, it is most astounding to find that the author of the paper just printed by the Royal Astronomical Society has made few or no observations himself, and has no pretence of being able to produce or having produced a book equally comprehensive and much more exact than the *Cycle*. He has merely collected, at the hands of two or three other persons, after the world has progressed for half a century, after the author of the *Cycle* is dead and his book no longer to be purchased, and when many new professionally appointed men are established in public Observatories in various countries, furnished with telescopes of nine times the power of that which belonged to the private author of the *Cycle*, and have brought them to bear, with plenty of time, leisure, and experience, on a few only of his less important entries, with the certain result of finding some of the old numbers improvable; the writer of the paper taken up by the Royal Astronomical Society has, I say, merely collected a very few corrections of such very correctible and weak items, and then endeavours . . . to ignore the very existence of all the completer, better, more numerous observations in the *Cycle*, and to persist in insinuating that everything whatever in that book must be of the character of the few cited errata, but which he tries to imply are of some very bad origination."

The sentiments expressed in this letter will, I am sure, recommend themselves to every honest man.

Mr. Barclay's Observatory,
Leyton, 1879. March 13.